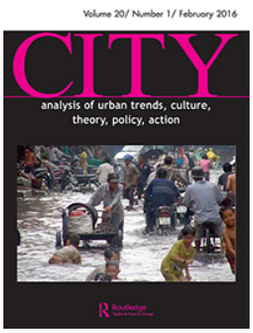

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Can resilience be redeemed?

Resilience as a metaphor for change, not against change

Geoff DeVerteuil and Oleg Golubchikov

Resilience has been critiqued as being regressively status quo and thus propping up neo-liberalism, that it lacks transformative potential, and that it can be used as a pretence to cast off needy people and places. We move from this critique of resilience to a critical resilience, based in the following arguments: (i) resilience can sustain alternative and previous practices that contradict neo-liberalism; (ii) resilience is more active and dynamic than passive; and (iii) resilience can sustain survival, thus acting as a precursor to more obviously transformative action such as resistance. These bring us more closely to a heterogeneous de-neo-liberalized reading of resilience, explicitly opening it to social justice, power relations and uneven development, and performing valuable conceptual and pragmatic work that usefully moves us beyond resistance yet retaining (long-term) struggle.

Key words: resilience, transformation, critical geography, critical resilience

Introduction

What is resilience? From a physical and natural sciences perspective, it implies the 'capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks' (Walker et al. 2004, 1). This is translated into the two essential categories: 'bounce-back-ability' and adaptability. But as critical geographers interested in transformative potentials, rather than disaster management, policy studies or ecology, we can underline Katz's (2004) more useful *social* definition of resilience as something additional to and yet distinct from 'reworking' and 'resistance'. Reworking involves shifting the conditions of people's reality to enable more workable lives; resistance draws on and constructs a critical conscience to challenge and rectify conditions of oppression and exploitation. Meanwhile, resilience captures the 'autonomous initiative [and] recuperation', the 'getting by', protection, care and mutualism that ensure survival in circumstances that disallow changes to the frameworks that dictate survival (Katz 2004, 242).

We want to use Katz's formulation as a point of departure for revisiting resilience along the lines of *critical resilience*. In the next section, we outline the important critiques of resilience emanating from our academic discipline, but we also argue that critical geographers should not relinquish the term without trying to co-opt it for

their own ends, given that the resilience metaphor is powerful enough to capture the essence of important social processes and yet flexible to work for a variety of systems and temporal frames. Put bluntly, there is nothing inherently negative or positive about resilience, as it is entirely contingent on who is wielding it, and for what political purposes (Cretney 2014). Recognizing the value in resilience as an analytical tool, we offer insights into the possible entries through which the metaphor of resilience can be 'redeemed' from neo-liberalized connotation—*transforming a critique of resilience into a critical resilience*, articulated via three theses. What we are particularly concerned in formulating these perspectives is the resilience of those groups and institutions that are threatened by neo-liberal ideologies and practices. The conclusion will then address some of the emerging shortcomings of a thus formulated critical resilience.

Resilience subsumed?

Over the past decade or so, resilience has undoubtedly become a buzzword in the social sciences and the policy world (Brown 2014; Cretney 2014; Slater 2014), emerging to some

> 'as the perfect symbol of its time—a conveniently nebulous concept incorporating shifting notions of risk and responsibility bounded within a reconstituted governance framework—all of which can engender confidence and potentially facilitate the transfer of costs away from the state to the private sector and communities'. (White and O'Hare 2014, 947)

Not surprisingly, this ascendancy has sown suspicion, consternation and sometimes ridicule among critical geographers (e.g. Cook and Swyngedouw 2012; Ward 2012; Slater 2014), including the fear that resilience nullifies transformative action while lacking conceptual rigor. More to the point, we can summarize the various critiques under three rubrics:

(1) Resilience is not ideologically neutral (even if it appears so) but necessarily props up the dominant system, which today is decidedly neo-liberal in its ideology (Cretney 2014). Here, resilience becomes a reactionary 'tool of governance' (O'Hare and White 2013) to perpetuate, sustain and reinforce a hegemonic status quo of dispossessing, predatory capitalism. As MacKinnon and Derickson (2013, 258) strenuously argued:

> 'resilience is fundamentally about how best to maintain the functioning of an existing system in the face of an externally derived disturbance. Both the ontological nature of "the system" and its normative desirability escape critical scrutiny. As a result, the existence of social divisions and inequalities tend to be glossed over when resilience thinking is extended to society.'

> While the general system stability and its boundaries are protected, the naturalistic and functionalistic framing of resilience is also mobilized to 'naturalize' particular agendas for reforms. The dominant powers provide a set of prescriptive fixes to ongoing problems or disturbances—be those linked to the crises of neo-liberalism or capitalism's environmental degradations—when what is essentially a political choice appears naturalized and thus void of alternative strategies that could disrupt the dominant modus operandi (e.g. Cook and Swyngedouw 2012).

(2) As an extension from the above, resilience lacks progressive potential, is inherently conservative yet appears politically anodyne, and thus serves the 'powerful interests to protect against … a dynamic or adaptive strategy' (Brown 2014, 109). Critical geographers insist that, as resilience cannot be constructed as a verb—contrary to the preferred 'rework' and 'resist'—it implies

passivity, a condition but not a process to secure a better future advocated. Here, calls for social justice and transformative (political) action are comfortably sidelined. As Hornborg (2009, 252) has vividly noticed in this regard, 'the rallying-cry of the early 21st century is not "revolution" (as in the early 20th century), but "resilience"'.

(3) 'Needy' people and regions can be cast off under the cynical pretence that they are ostensibly resilient (Andres and Round 2015). As MacKinnon and Derickson (2013) argued, this shedding means that resilience becomes integral to neo-liberal urban governance, in which 'the vacuous yet ubiquitous notion that communities ought to be "resilient" can be seen as particularly troubling in the context of austerity and reinforced neoliberalism' (262). This offloading and devolution of responsibility and redistribution leaves 'disadvantaged communities having fewer material resources, professional skill sets, and stocks of social capital to "step up" to fill the gaps created by state retrenchment' (263). In a charming (yet ultimately wayward) blog by Tom Slater (2014), the concern was that, at least in the policy and think-tank world, vulnerable people and places are deemed resilient for sinister means, and that it is 'no coincidence' that 'an entire cottage industry on "resilient cities" has emerged at a time of global austerity'.

These critiques must be taken seriously indeed, but they are insufficient to irrevocably and universally reject resilience. Rather, these critiques may be a useful handle for further (critical) engagement. Arguably, resilience per se is not born as a servile neo-liberal creation as much as it is a co-optation and strategic meshing; resilience is of course a social construct but it precedes neo-liberalism. While it may appear to be ready-made for these austere times, it is not an inevitable nor invariable fit. Rather, resilience has been colonized by particular discourses and for particular means, and if this is the case, then other (non-neo-liberal) systems and agents can do the same. Resilience is far more polytonal and less inherently sinister and conservative; to argue otherwise is to maintain the fiction of the all-embracing nature of neo-liberalism—to which we say, not everything is neo-liberal or solely in response to it, nor should neo-liberalism be viewed as a self-explanatory, universal metanarrative.

To this end, resilience deserves more than just discontent, caricatures, potshots and dismissal. As the philosopher Daniel Dennett (2014) has argued, a key strategy for critique is to respect one's opponent—this is done by choosing the best work to tangle with, rather than lambasting the worst of it (e.g. targeting of vacuous policy and think-tank proclamations on resilience). In this spirit, resilience deserves sustained intellectual engagement, the ultimate aim of which could be not just its deconstruction but *also* a reconstruction along critical lines. This paper is animated by the sense that the former is relatively easy, but that the latter is onerous yet necessary, in the manner that Burawoy et al. (1991) proposed—to reconstruct and strengthen useful, already-existing theory.

But why this effort to redeem a concept, which, at least in the eyes of some, has been discredited by particular connotations? We believe that acting otherwise would have meant intellectual capitulation over a seemingly fruitful and important conceptual terrain that holds much emancipatory promise and is a powerful and capacious metaphor to not only decipher a range of important geographical practices, but also their coexistence, interpenetration and co-constitution—which would otherwise require bringing together a whole bundle of alternative concepts. The eventual aim here is to propose a more sustained, sophisticated treatment—and critical co-optation—of resilience, of filling in 'theoretical gaps or silences' (Burawoy et al. 1991, 10) while suggesting the essential components of a

critical resilience—a task made even more crucial in these uncertain times (O'Hare and White 2013).

Assisted by the term's remarkable suppleness, we propose several theses for its redemption, prompted by our own research around 'persistent resilience' (Golubchikov 2011; also Andres and Round 2015) and the 'resilience of the residuals' (DeVerteuil 2015). This material focuses on the resilience of 'survivor' communities, providing ammunition for formulating the three 'theses' as entry points for the redemption of resilience as a critical concept: (i) resilience can sustain alternative and previous practices that contradict neo-liberalism; (ii) resilience is more active and dynamic than passive; and (iii) resilience can sustain survival, thus acting as a precursor to more obviously transformative action such as resistance. These bring us more closely to a heterogeneous de-neo-liberalized reading of resilience, explicitly opening it to social justice, power relations and uneven development, and performing valuable conceptual and pragmatic work that usefully moves us beyond resistance yet retaining (long-term) struggle.

Thesis 1: resilience can sustain alternative practices orthogonal to dominant ones

In response to the first critique of resilience, we argue that if resilience is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative, then surely it can be deployed to bolster alternate and previous practices that are residual yet orthogonal to the dominant, naturalized neo-liberalized one. For instance, resilience can be applied to the residuals of a previous, more equitable power structure such as that found in Keynesian relics like social housing and non-commodified clusters of the voluntary sector and the social economy that provided visions of opportunity and progress unsullied by the market (DeVerteuil 2015, 35). From this alternative and grass-roots vision, resilience acts as a bulwark against unmitigated neo-liberalism, but also in a space entirely beyond it. Examples abound: faith-based organizations that eschew state funding in order to maintain their independence and presumably socially transformative goals (Williams forthcoming); legally mandated and politically protected social services, including local welfare in California (DeVerteuil, Lee, and Wolch 2002; see Fairbanks 2009 for Pennsylvania) or locally provided adult services in the UK (Fuller 2012) that make them virtually austerity-proof; and the presence of 'commons', in which spaces and activities are removed from commodification, becoming non- or even anti-capitalist. In all of these cases, neo-liberalism threatens but does not eliminate the social and spatial practices of alternative systems (Hall and Lamont 2013). This suggests the potential that resilience can be deployed in less regressive ways, 'as an organizing principle … to challenge the status quo and to design and shape alternative futures' (Brown 2014, 113).

These examples suggest that resilience becomes partially unmoored from neo-liberalism. This counters the understandably myopic tendency among certain critical geographers to only look—and thus only find—instances of co-opted neo-liberal resilience, a tendency that parallels the obsession with privileging punitive social policies rather than trying to see how other, more neutral or accommodative kinds of social policies work relationally (DeVerteuil 2014). Indeed, if one looks one will find many examples of co-opted uses of resilience, but this does not mean that *all* instances are neo-liberalized. Rather, some may well be and others not—a reconstructive approach necessarily must incorporate both kinds and be open to both kinds. The same logic applies to alternative terms to resilience—such as MacKinnon and Derickson's (2013) 'resourcefulness', which can equally be co-opted by neo-liberalism (Barrett 2014).

An important implication to this argument is that resilience does not simply mean 'bouncing back' to a previous, steady-state position—there is always opportunity for

articulation of a different status quo after the disturbance, such that there is no pre-ordained trajectory. Persistent resilience in the face of enduring contextual challenges and pressures may herald an active moderation of social relations (e.g. through empathy and reciprocity) than simply a passive response. As DeVerteuil (2015, 27) advanced in this regard, 'resilience should impart a sense of adaptive capacity, a proactivity and potential for learning—it is produced and earned rather than being an inherent property'. As Raco and Street (2012, 1069) further contended, 'rather than seeing resilience as a process of bouncing back, a more radical deployment would … view it as a dynamic process in which change and constant reinvention provide the grounds for fundamental … reform'. In this sense, resilience need not be conservative or sinister, but rather open to change for those phenomena that actively endure and persist in time and space against the grain.

Thesis 2: resilience is not a passive condition, but is actively produced

Following up on the previous thesis, we must re-imagine resilience as something internally *produced* (not just externally induced), adaptive and capacity-building, rather than as an end point or a steady-state condition, or even necessarily desirable. White and O'Hare (2014, 934) deemed the distinction between 'evolutionary resilience', which is proactive and open to creating a 'new normality', and 'equilibrium resilience', which is 'fatalistic … accepting the status quo, leaving unchallenged current norms of behavior that drive risky behavior, and privileging reactive responses to risk' (White and O'Hare 2014, 937). Given the increasingly corrosive trends in neo-liberalism (Hall and Lamont 2013), producing resilience has become more complicated and fraught, and so requires considerable effort and strategy, not simply inertial persistence (DeVerteuil 2015). Here, resilience can be envisioned as something more proactive than reactive, a stance that 'accepts the inevitability of change and tries to create a system that is capable of adapting to new conditions and imperatives' (Klein, Nicholls, and Thomalla 2003, 39).

Along these lines, resilience can be deployed in instances when resistance and transgressions do not make sense, because the agents in question are too weak, disorganized or simply not interested. In this way, resilience can be a *middle ground* between victim and vanguard, when social actors cannot alter circumstances but still show agency, self-organization and adeptness in coping and adaptation, particularly in the face of filling gaps from neo-liberal austerity. Here, resilience tones down the prospect of the spectacular in favor of the mundane 'weak theory' (Hodkinson 2011) as a way to offset all of the fuss around the big, the vocal, the cries and demands heard in public spaces (Harvey 2012), as well as responding to the catastrophic (Vale and Campanella 2005). Andres and Round (2015) see resilience as everyday responses and informal coping strategies to the Schumpeterian trends of neo-liberalism and austerity. Accordingly, resilience is effective at capturing the actual space of the everyday life, even if critical geographers remain mesmerized by the promise of the spectacular.

We fully appreciate that resilience is by nature incremental, capturing the slow-moving rather than the spectacular nature of social change. However, Rajan and Duncan (2013) defended small, incremental social change initiated through small-scale institutions. What they emphasize is how the incremental necessarily involves a variety of 'first responder' social institutions and collectivities—family, community, local governments and the voluntary sector—that enable everyday social reproduction. But these institutions can also deploy resilience in creative and innovative ways—which implies knowing when to (spectacularly) resist but also when to endure, outlast and outflank, and when to ignore the (neo-liberal) system

altogether. Here, resilience necessitates the multiple, mutual and nuanced forms of adaptation of individual, households and communities to each other's activities and to the wider conditioning order. If everyday life has become an arena where late capitalism sustains and reproduces itself, as Lefebvre (2008) contended, and where neo-liberalism has been domesticated (Stenning et al. 2010), it is also where negotiation and renegotiation of the hegemonic tendencies are happening. Resilience can then be seen as a frontier negotiation vis-à-vis neo-liberalism—the process that is not necessarily leading to outright acceptance or unidirectional adaptation, but potentially to neo-liberalism's own diversion and particularization into more socially acceptable, or hybrid local practices (Golubchikov, Badyina, and Makhrova 2014).

The idea of produced resilience, as proactive renegotiation of everyday practices and relationships, also suggests that resilience has the potential to undermine the wider (contextually neo-liberal) hegemony. This necessary changes the conception of resilience from mechanistic and post-/non-political to actually political, relational and spatial. Resilience is political because it can be actively produced and gives voice to people who are not simply victims of change or top-down technical fixes, but themselves have the agency of (political) actions and transactions. Resilience here may involve an active moderation of existing social relations rather than being a passive response to the external stimuli of change. Resilience is also relational because it relies on a web of social relations. We need not idealize the capacity of ordinary people to produce systematic change (even when it is desired at all), but resilience can stimulate social activism, social movements and networks that are essential seeds of transformations. Finally, resilience is spatial because it belongs to the domain of the everyday and real-world engagement with spatial processes, where, for instance, the call for spatial justice can be articulated. The ability, for example, to sustain spatial presence in the face of gentrification is itself a political statement (DeVerteuil 2012), without which any further acts and forms of mobilization and resistance against displacement become empty signifiers. Here, as we discuss below, resilience can work as a precursor for resistance, if not as its constitutive part.

Thesis 3: resilience acts as the precursor to resistance and transformation

It follows that resilience can be at the forefront of defending previous, current and future social and economic gains, gains that can no longer be taken for granted. This 'persistent resilience' (Golubchikov 2011) is all the more important at a time when urban life is not only pervasively dynamic and neo-liberalized, but also increasingly temporary, in the form of pop-up geographies and an emphasis, via technologies such as Airbnb, on transient users and uses, all of which can displace the more long-standing urban materialities. This enforced temporariness and flux, however, must bump up against the more resilient components of previous and current renderings of the city, and in this way resilience can prove positive against trends that only exacerbate the precarious nature of disposable urbanity, providing a much-needed slowing down of the frenetic and the disruptive.

Resilience can thus be seen as *primordial*, *prefigurative* and *embryonic* rather than merely an inadvertent, short-term coping mechanism and make-do survival—the latter of which can be seen as merely absorbing and obscuring state abandonment and thus putting off much-needed transformative change. Resilience is not solely the 'in-between' before inevitable displacement—it can become long term or even permanent. In this way, resilience can be understood as a social and spatial foundation, an anchor for future resistance and reworking, its essential underpinning and precursor. In this regard, Slater (2014) is perhaps too rushed in pitting resistance vs. resilience, as they do in fact work in temporal sequence (or can

be even temporary co-constitutive), not either/or. By plugging gaps in the short term and ensuring survival in the long term, resilience ensures the future whereby transformation may occur. As a precursor to potential transformation, resilience becomes an important first link of the sequence, but also as a social and spatial 'fix' to sustain certain social orders and absorb crises. This fix of course can be abused by neo-liberalism, obscuring state abandonment and thus averting the revolution, but without the immediate plugging of gaps we really would risk totalitarianism or social collapse, which is hardly worth the price of our ideological purity (DeVerteuil 2014). Yes, resilience is recursive and provisional (Martin 2012), and yet it demands a longer attention span than the spectacular and the one-off.

Returning to the third critique of resilience—how resilience is used as a pretence to offload responsibility to vulnerable places and people—we can argue that critical geographers tend to underestimate the degree and agency of resilience in those targeted places and people, the resolute and obstinate persistence and endurance that build on layers of previous and existing resilience. This layering can be difficult to disentangle, but stout enough to withstand the newest layer of the neo-liberalizing city. In this way we can see urban space through a palimpsest metaphor, with each spatial and historical layer offering its own resilience, but with the caveat that it is unrealistic to expect urban space to never change. Moreover, rarely is there complete abandonment and dismissal of places and people, at least not in a supposedly democratic society; there is usually a carrot to go along with the stick, which returns us to the point of systems and phenomena that exist beyond neo-liberalism/austerity. And rarely are communities so completely helpless that they cannot activate at least some resilient, mutualistic behavior, which may be abused by the neo-liberal system but which also ensures survival and *secures a potentially better future*. Therefore, we should not forfeit the positive side of resilience entirely, like Slater (2014) did in his characterizations of an austerity-bound, neo-liberalized and territorially stigmatizing resilience. If anything, we need more resilience, but the right kind, not the one that props up the neo-liberal.

There are many other ways to reimagine resilience in the way of its redemption—if not liberation—from its neo-liberalized connotations (both in dominant politics and as its derivatives in critical literature). However, what is central is that resilience should not be seen as inherently and invariably positive or negative. Although it can be easily a political tool to ensure rigidity or the conceptually anodyne, it is not doomed to be such. Overly positive, romanticized views of resilience (as well as of its bearers—such as communities or vulnerable social groups) are not productive either, but the metaphor remains powerful as an epistemological insight into societal changes, continuities, contradictions and struggles. More to the point, and in response to some post-structural critiques that deem resilience an 'empty signifier' (Braun 2014), resilience has real spatial and temporal effects on, and implications for, critical understandings of society, cities and the nature of struggle in the 21st century—of what should change and what should stay the same.

Conclusion

Our overriding concern has been the potential to redeem (but not romanticize) resilience, especially in the eyes of critical geographers, but also to indirectly contribute to what may be termed 'resilience theory' (Berkes and Ross 2013). What we have shown is that resilience can be orthogonal to neo-liberalism, that it can be active and capacity-building rather than passive, and that it can be a necessary precursor to resistance and transformation—in short, a metaphor for change, not against change.

Following on from this last point, we can argue that resilience can be integral to social and spatial struggle—defensive and protective of course (Churchill 2003), but a struggle

that cannot be passed over. Resilience therefore can be about securing the future and 'much less about bouncing back' (Andres and Round 2015, 678), equally contingent, emergent and simultaneous. As DeVerteuil (2015, 236) contended, resilience of alternative systems 'counters the fiction of a fully … neoliberalized … city, and valorizes the study of slow tectonic shifts of urban space over the violent, acute events that still capture too much of our attention'. If we cannot hold on to the gains made previously or presently, what hope have we of transforming the future world? This seems trite but it is frequently assumed away by, and for, a critical audience.

We duly admit that resilience constitutes a 'politics of necessity' (Zuern 2011) that only partially foregrounds a politics of change (but see Cretney 2014). We thus cannot solely rely on resilience, as it is not always very effective in promoting large-scale new systems out of the deformation of old ones, and certainly not in the short term. Therefore, resilience promotes small-scale and incremental transformation, so that resiliently alternative spaces can become springboards for more fundamental transformation via the concept of the 'commons', which can be

> 'preservative and generative, defensive and productive, a necessary way-station on the path towards more socially just transformation, rather than merely as "anti-enclosures", which imply only delaying and obfuscating, but never truly changing, the inevitable outcome of eventual enclosure and displacement'. (DeVerteuil 2015, 242)

As distillations of non-commodified enclaves, commons obstruct the process of neo-liberalism and austerity urbanism, and provide an entry point of engagement for critical geographers.

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